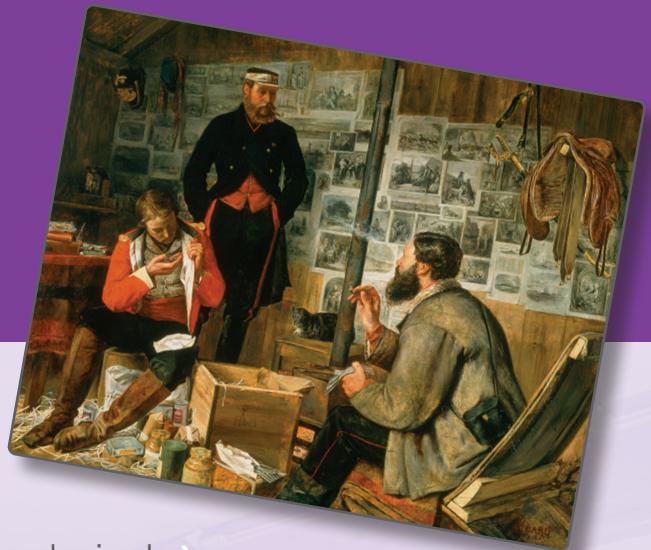


# Military Speak

## A glossary for *Soldiers and Chiefs*



Soldiers have a language of their own. Some of these words and phrases are technical descriptions of aspects of the military life. Others are slang or metaphors that have found their way into everyday speech. You might be using military terms without even realising it!

As you explore the displays in the *Soldiers and Chiefs* exhibition, you might find some unfamiliar terms. This information booklet provides definitions for a number of military words, grouped into these categories:

- Kinds of Soldiers
- Army Ranks
- Army Weapons

# Kinds of Soldiers

This set of military terms for different kinds of soldiers will help you to become familiar with the terminology used in the exhibitions. Some of these terms are no longer used in today's armies.

## Civilian

a non-military person: a soldier's life starts as a civilian

## Soldier

a soldier serves in an army, wearing a uniform and carrying a weapon

## Infantry

soldiers who are trained to fight on foot  
in the past, included such types as fusilier, grenadier and rifleman

## Cavalry

soldiers who were trained to fight on horseback  
the common types of cavalry were hussar, lancer and dragoon

## Artilleryman

a soldier with specialized training to operate artillery (cannons)  
a term used since the 16th century

## Rifleman

an infantry soldier trained to use an accurate weapon (a rifle) and to operate in small groups to harass the enemy  
a term used since the 18th century

## Specialist Soldiers of the 18th and 19th Centuries

### Hussar (pronounced 'who's-are')

an elaborately uniformed member of a light cavalry unit (relatively small men on small horses), trained to scout for enemy positions and to charge in battle

### Lancer

a member of a light cavalry unit with a special weapon, a lance, intended to intimidate and defeat enemy cavalry and infantry

### Dragoon (or Dragoon Guard)

a member of a heavy cavalry unit consisting of big soldiers on big horses; when they charged, the shock overwhelmed the enemy and broke their formations

### Fusilier

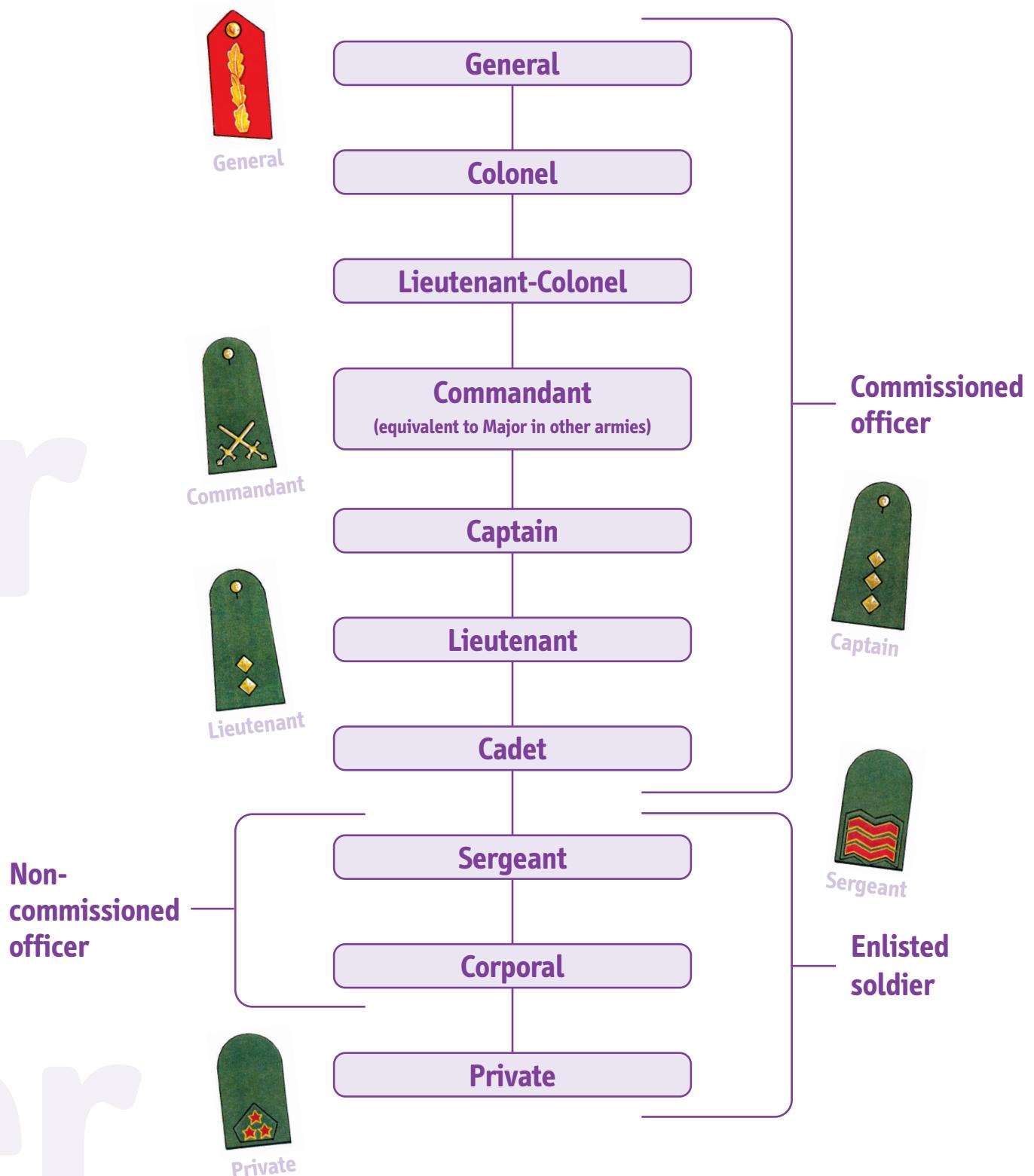
originally, a soldier who used a fusil (a kind of musket); later a member of a particular infantry regiment given elite status; fusiliers wore distinctive furry dress hats

### Grenadier

the biggest and strongest men in an infantry unit, who were trained to carry and throw grenades

# Army Ranks

This illustration demonstrates the hierarchy of ranks in the Irish Army, from general to private.



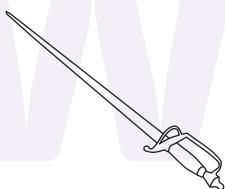
**Men and women join the Army in two ways:**

They can enlist as an ordinary soldier.

They can be commissioned to the post of officer.

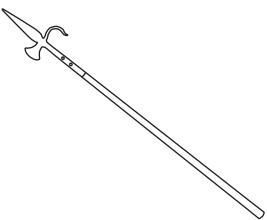
# Army Weapons

Do you know the difference between a pike and a lance, or a rifle and a carbine? This list of definitions with illustrations will clarify the distinctions among the weapons on display in the *Soldiers and Chiefs* exhibition. The list is organised in rough chronological order, from early to recent types of technology – from edged weapons to firearms and to weapons of the 20th century.



## Sword

a hand weapon with a long, sharp, pointed blade



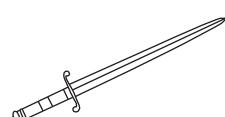
## Pike

a long wooden shaft, tipped by a metal spearhead, used by a foot soldier



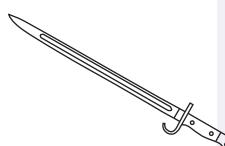
## Lance

a weapon with a metal spearhead on a long wooden shaft, used on horseback by cavalry soldiers



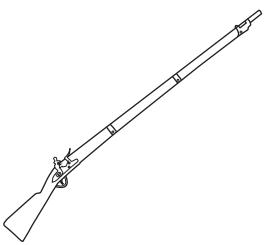
## Dirk

a dagger or small knife, worn by junior officers in the army or navy



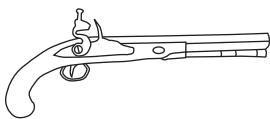
## Bayonet

a long knife or short sword, which is attached to the end of a rifle to turn it into a kind of pike



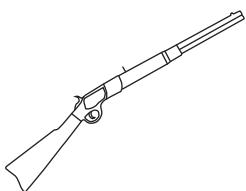
### **Musket**

a gun with a long barrel and a smooth bore (barrel interior), loaded from the muzzle and fired from the shoulder



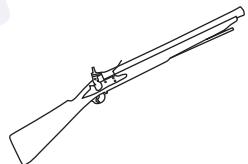
### **Pistol**

a small gun that can be held and fired with one hand



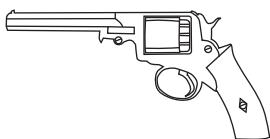
### **Rifle**

a long-barrelled gun, fired from the shoulder, with grooves (called rifling) in the barrel, which spin the bullet for greater range and accuracy



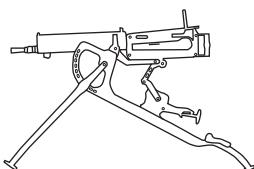
### **Carbine**

a lightweight, short-barrelled version of a musket or rifle, intended for use on horseback



### **Revolver**

a hand-held gun with a revolving cylinder for bullets, allowing it to be fired several times without reloading



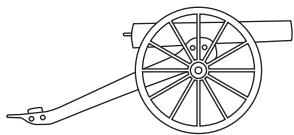
### **Machine-gun**

a heavy automatic gun that fires a rapid and continuous stream of bullets



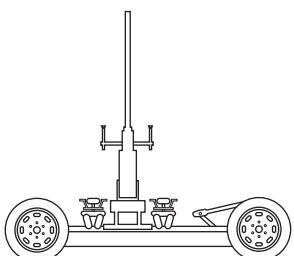
### Sub-machine-gun

a portable automatic gun that fires brief bursts of bullets



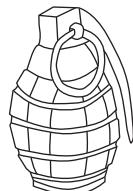
### Field Artillery

large cannons that require animal or engine-power to move around; they are often named by the weight of the projectile they throw, such as a 12-pounder cannon



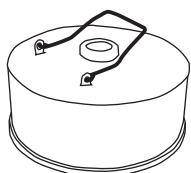
### Anti-aircraft gun

a mounted rapid-firing cannon used for defence against enemy aircraft



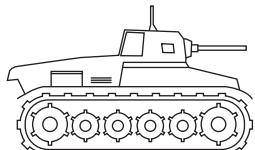
### Grenade

a small bomb, thrown by hand or fired from a rifle, and detonated by a timed fuse



### Landmine

an explosive device hidden beneath the surface of the ground, which is triggered by the pressure of troops or vehicles going over it



### Armoured Vehicle

a wheeled or tracked vehicle (often mounting weapons) that has armour protection against small arms fire

# Military Metaphors

A metaphor is a figure of speech that is not meant literally but is intended as a comparison. In everyday speech we use metaphors that have a military origin. Have you ever used any of these words or phrases?

## A flash in the pan

**Everyday Speech:** a spectacular event without effect in the long term

**Military Origin:** what happens when the spark from flint fails to ignite the gunpowder in a flintlock firearm

## AWOL

**Everyday Speech:** absenting oneself from duty without permission

**Military Origin:** **A**bsent **W**ith**O**ut **L**eave

## Biting the bullet

**Everyday Speech:** facing up to an unpleasant consequence

**Military Origin:** legendary method of dealing with the pain of amputation, by biting down on the soft lead of a bullet

## Carte blanche (French for blank page)

**Everyday Speech:** permission to act without restraint

**Military Origin:** the term given to a surrender without conditions; i.e. the victors could write their own terms for the losers on a blank sheet

## Closing ranks

**Everyday Speech:** collecting people or resources to deal with an external threat

**Military Origin:** in the past soldiers marched shoulder to shoulder during a battle; the closer together the ranks were, the more formidable their appearance to the enemy

## Commandeer

**Everyday Speech:** to seize or appropriate something, perhaps illegally

**Military Origin:** a term borrowed ('commandeered') by the British Army from the Boers in the late 19th century; originally *kommandeer*, from the Afrikaans language

## To dragoon

**Everyday Speech:** forcing someone to do something they don't want to

**Military Origin:** reflects the bad reputation of the cavalrymen called dragoons, who in the 17th and 18th centuries often mistreated civilians

## To draw a bead

**Everyday Speech:** aiming carefully at some target

**Military Origin:** the bead is the front sight on a firearm

## Facing the music

**Everyday Speech:** face up to an unpleasant consequence

**Military Origin:** when a soldier was dishonorably dismissed from his unit, the band played 'The Rogue's March', a tune signifying dishonour

## Flak

**Everyday Speech:** criticism or trouble

**Military Origin:** abbreviation of the German *Fliegerabwehrkanone*, meaning anti-aircraft cannon; usually refers to the fire from such a weapon

## To go off at half cock

**Everyday Speech:** act in a premature or unprepared manner

**Military Origin:** flintlock weapons had two settings to cock (or set) the spring-loaded hammer; if the gun went off at half-cock, it would fire prematurely

## Grog

**Everyday Speech:** alcohol (particularly rum)

**Military Origin:** from the nickname of Admiral Edward Vernon who watered down the sailors' rum ration; he was known as 'old grogram' for the fabric of the cloak he often wore

## Hanging fire

**Everyday Speech:** something expected which fails to happen

**Military Origin:** refers to the failure of a weapon to fire

## Last ditch

**Everyday Speech:** final, often desperate attempt or situation

**Military Origin:** in defending a fort, the soldiers were in a bad way if they were forced back to the last defensive barrier or ditch

## Long shot

**Everyday Speech:** a hopeful but unlikely trial or attempt

**Military Origin:** the effective range of cannons was limited, but some damage might result from a shot at extreme range

## No names, no pack drill

**Everyday Speech:** without relevant details, individual responsibility cannot be assigned for a misdeed

**Military Origin:** pack-drill was a minor army punishment

## Rank and file

**Everyday Speech:** ordinary or lower-status individuals

**Military Origin:** soldiers on parade were organised into ranks (from side to side) and files (from front to back)

## Recce (pronounced 'wreck-y')

**Everyday Speech:** the process of exploring the possibilities

**Military Origin:** short for reconnaissance, the process of finding out what the enemy is doing

## To ride roughshod over

**Everyday Speech:** to treat with disregard

**Military Origin:** cavalry horses were sometimes given special sharpened horseshoes (shod rough) to harm any infantry they charged

## The scuttlebut

**Everyday Speech:** rumour or gossip

**Military Origin:** the scuttlebut was the water barrel where sailors gathered to drink and gossip, just as people do today at the office water cooler

### To steal a march

**Everyday Speech:** obtain an advantage by a ruse or trick

**Military Origin:** opposing armies once camped by night and marched by day; if one began the march during the night, it would gain an advantage

### (Not enough) space to swing a cat

**Everyday Speech:** a confined space

**Military Origin:** the cat is the cat-of-nine-tails (a whip with multiple strands) used to punish sailors; below decks on the ship the space was very limited, so the punishment took place on deck

### Spiking his guns

**Everyday Speech:** invalidating his arguments

**Military Origin:** muzzle-loading cannon had a touch-hole used to fire the gunpowder within; if a nail was hammered in this hole, the gun became useless

### Turncoat

**Everyday Speech:** a traitor

**Military Origin:** supposedly, the process of dismissing a renegade soldier involved making him wear his coat inside out; another explanation suggests that a German prince kept a jacket that was Saxon blue on one side and French white on the other; he could 'turn his coat' to match that of the prevailing power

### Watchword

**Everyday Speech:** principle governing all activity

**Military Origin:** the password for the 'watch', the soldiers on sentry duty around the camp

### With flying colours

**Everyday Speech:** great success

**Military Origin:** warships returning from a victory at sea would decorate all their masts with flags (colours) as a sign of their success

## Words from the Wardrobe

Some terms for clothing have a military origin.

### Balaclava hat

**Everyday Speech:** a knitted head covering, protecting the ears and face

**Military Origin:** first introduced during the Crimean War, which included the Battle of Balaclava

### Camouflage

**Everyday Speech:** to disguise or conceal from view

**Military Origin:** disguising the appearance of troops and equipment to conceal them from the enemy

### Cardigan

**Everyday Speech:** knitted jacket with buttons down the front

**Military Origin:** named after Lord Cardigan, the leader of the Light Cavalry Brigade during the Crimean War

## **Khaki**

**Everyday Speech:** a dull, yellowish brown cloth

**Military Origin:** from the Urdu word for dust or dust-coloured, originally adopted by the British Army in India; Urdu is an Indo-Aryan language spoken mainly in Pakistan and India

## **Raglan sleeve**

**Everyday Speech:** a sleeve that has no defined shoulder seam

**Military Origin:** the one-armed Lord Raglan, commander of the British forces in the Crimea, wore garments with this kind of sleeve

## **In Other Words**

These terms entered common usage as a result of soldiers stationed overseas talking to local people.

### **Buckshee**

**Military Meaning:** something for free, often a tip or bribe

**Original Language:** from the Persian word for a present

### **Mingy men**

**Military Meaning:** the term used by the Irish Defence Force soldiers to refer to shopkeepers in the Lebanon

**Original Language:** from a local dialect in the Congo, meaning 'many'; sellers of goods to Irish soldiers told them: 'I have 'mingy' gifts for you to look at'

### **Mufti**

**Military Meaning:** British Army slang for civilian clothing

**Original Language:** from the Arabic *mufti* (holy man); the soldiers were joking about the contrast between the loose, informal civilian clothes of the Arabs and their own tight uniforms

## Notes

# Military Speak

A glossary for *Soldiers and Chiefs*

## Want to know more?

For more information on exhibitions and education programmes, contact the Education and Outreach Department of the National Museum of Ireland.

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